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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the author's perceptions of the reasons for the tarnished image of advisors and academic advisement. Specific problems are discussed under seven headings. These are: (1) Advisor Credibility, (2) Becoming Aware of Advisee Constructs, (3) Reducing Advisee Defensiveness concerning Related constructs, (4) Advisee Challenge of Non-Utilitarian Constructs, (5) Designing Effective Advisee Change Strategies, (6) Encouraging Advisee Responsibility through Contracting, and (7) Meaningful, Change-producing Assessment. (KS)

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ANALYSIS OF THE ACADEMIC ADVISEMENT PROCESS

Dr. Thomas Allan

No one in the academic setting seems very happy with advisement. Administrators would like less criticism from the consumers. Faculty would like more credit for doing it, or less responsibility for it. Students either avoid it or pan for it as prospectors pan for gold.

WHAT IS WRONG?

1) The image of advisors is tarnished. This is not a big surprise since at most schools the rewards for faculty are few. Students taught and/or publications accepted is often "where it's at." Advising takes a lot of time, if done well.

2) In many instances the persons designated to perform the task are not appropriately equipped to do the task well.

3) Advisement is a two-way process and many faculty, when they perform as teachers, or advisors, stress a one-way mode of communication (conceivably possible in the classroom, but usually a disaster in the advisement setting--as unexpected as Beethoven's productivity after he became deaf).

4) Students feel that they must defend their present behavioral predilections. It is extremely attractive to choose the side untaken in any argument. This becomes a doubly seductive proposition when to do so allows one to defend old, familiar behaviors.

5) Change is a pain. It seems to threaten the previous validity of past behavior. It engenders anxiety related to deciding upon the appropriateness of behavior. It often suggests the need for additional extensive revision of familiar perceptions of the way things work. "Wouldn't it be terrible if I tried, but failed." (Better not to have loved, than to have loved and lost).

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6) There is the temptation, in the face of failure, to try to do harder, or more frequently, or more blatantly, the things that we <u>believe</u> can help--often, in spite of our crude but obvious negative feedback about their effectiveness.

It would appear that what is needed is a more flexible, experimental attitude with regards to the advisement process and a more sophisticated method for evaluating advisor effectiveness.

This philosophical rationale for facilitative advisement in a variety of academic settings, regardless of level, was specifically devised to deal with these six problems. Six facets of the attack will be discussed.

I <u>ADVISOR CREDIBILITY:</u>

Polishing tarnished advisor images seems to be related to the credibility or "placebo impact" aspect of behavior mediation (a la Frank). Witchcraft has been described as "induced auto-suggestion." The implications of this for the advisement situation seem obvious: If advisors are more believeable they are more <u>likely</u> to have an impact. For example: Being either a distinguished professor or department chairperson has often facilitated efficient, and hopefully, effective advisement. Conditions of rank or status are likely to continue to be associated with advisor effectiveness. However, as a result of the increasing complexity of advisement information and the reluctance of some faculty to conscientiously serve in a role for which they feel poorly trained or minimally rewarded, new sources of advisement are being experimented with. Peer advisors and student personnel specialists are being used in increasing numbers. The credibility problems of these relatively new advisement resources must be considered along with those posed by the poorly prepared or motivated traditional agents of the past.

Traditional image (face validity) and/or reputation for demonstrated advisor effectiveness are the two main keys to the problem.

In the absence, for practical or theoretical reasons, of adequate traditional (faculty) resources, those persons responsible for the advisement function must focus upon the means for enhancing the effectiveness of either traditional or non-traditional advisement personnel. To this end, five additional methods for improving advisor effectiveness will be dealt with in the remainder of this presentation.

II BECOMING AWARE OF ADVISEE CONSTRUCTS:

This goal is viewed as mandatory in reducing advisor/advisee communication problems. The counseling behaviors recommended by Rogers and Kelly that relate to active listening, reflection, and clarification are most important in accomplishing this goal. Understanding the advisee's perceived environment, as it relates to the presented academic problem(s), is the aim for the advisor. Too often advisors discuss problems with advisees without regard for client constructs. If the advisor is successful in accomplishing this particular goal, it should be evident in the affective freedom of participation evidenced by advisees. Silent acceptance rarely accompanies success.

III REDUCING ADVISEE DEFENSIVENESS CONCERNING RELATED CONSTRUCTS:

Acceptance, congruence, and non-judgmental discussion of advisee constructs related to the presented problem are most effective in achieving this particular goal. Alternating passive acceptance (Rogers) and active confrontation (Ellis) usually results in stimulating advisee movement in the desired directions. It should be kept in mind that pervasive passivity may be a sympton of continued advisee defensiveness.

IV ADVISEE CHALLENGE OF NON-UTILITARIAN CONSTRUCTS:

Theoretically, at this point, advisor and advisee should be communicating quite directly. Therefore, the need for subtlety, if it has existed in the past, should be considerably reduced. Ellis' direct challenge of "irrational" ideas as they relate to individual advisee concerns is usually appropriate at this point. (Continued application of Roger's "client-centered" approach is recommended when client defensiveness is strongly evident.) Irrational ideas are defined as constructs learned by the advisee from significant others that hamper achievement of advisee goals. (Advisee goals, when clarified, are always accepted by the advisor (a la, Glasser). When the advisee is quite willing to examine alternative constructs relating to his goals, it is time to proceed to the next step.

V DESIGNING EFFECTIVE ADVISEE CHANGE STRATEGIES:

To understand this step is to understand the term "do-able-bits" (Glasser). A "do-able-bit" is the optimal bit of behavior that one is presently capable of doing. Its importance in behavior mediation stems from the popular irrational attractions to alternate extremes. Many people choose "bits" that are boringly easy or excitingly "too difficult." The first type result in minimal growth and the second in "excusable" failure. The type of goals chosen by advisees should, whenever possible, be channelled into those possessing socially-valued, observable, behavioral (SVOB) characteristics (Truax). Teaching advisees to plan changes in ineffective habituated behavior in such a way that reinforcement for desired changes occurs is the goal.

VI ENCOURAGING ADVISEE RESPONSIBILITY THROUGH CONTRACTING:

The ideas presented in accomplishing the particular goal are almost pure Glasser. The advisee selects his goals on the basis of his own system of values. Commitments are made by the advisee as to the manner in which he will implement them. A method for reporting the accomplishment of a particular contracted goal is established. No excuses for failure to fulfill an approved contract are accepted. Subsequent contracting is influenced by the failure or success in fullfilling prior contract-keeping, not generating plausible reasons for failure. Being responsible for oneself is not necessarily just a philosophical preference, it is a strategy for combating inappropriate passivity.

VII MEANINGFUL, CHANGE-PRODUCING ASSESSMENT:

Advisors have problems similar to vocational counselors in that the mutual criteria for judging success tend to not be either immediate or uncontaminated by other variables. If, however, in the steps related to planning change strategies (goals chosen in terms of the previously mentioned SVOB structure and behavioral contracting) a conscientious effort is made to specify exactly what is expected of both advisor and advisee, a body of relevant data will be generated. Be willing to accept available and socially valued indices of effectiveness. These include, GPA, graduation, job placement, and acceptance in graduate school or other post-bachelor training.

Variations in the implementation of this program at the University of Maryland include presentations made to faculty, peer, and minority advisors, as well as designated graduate assistants. Consumer response has been very positive, with the exception of a minority of participating faculty advisors.

Here response varies depending upon the underlying philosophy of the particular department. For example, results have been very positive in the college of education, while some experiences in certain departments of the arts and humanities area have been disappointing. Feedback suggests that certain faculty members, either appropriately or defensively, feel that they have little to learn in the area of advisement. As mentioned earlier a client-centered, passive approach is usually most effective when dealing with defensive clientele.